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Exploration and Discovery.

THE LATEST DISCOVERY FROM THE EGYPTIAN FAYUM.

By JAMES HENRY BREASTED,
Royal Museum, Berlin.

The soil of that fertile district in the Nile valley known as the Fayum has been rich in the treasures it has offered us during the last five years. In a previous number of this periodical the writer gave some account of the remarkable portrait mummies found there by Brugsch and Flinders Petrie, and now deposited in London and Berlin. The remains preserved in that region have brought us a further contribution of far greater interest from a historical point of view, being the most important find since upper Egypt furnished us with the Gospel and Apocalypse of Peter last year.

There is at present lying in the store-rooms of the Royal Museum here, a large mass of dirty, torn and worm-eaten papyri, brought from the Fayum by Brugsch, which formed the official records of the provincial government in this rich farming district during the first few centuries after Christ. As fast as they can be properly mounted on glass plates and made readable they are being deciphered and published by the young doctors of the Museum, chiefly by Dr. Krebs. They are for the most part Greek, with occasionally some Coptic, and contain everything imaginable in the way of records, from a trust deed, a bill of sale, or a receipt, to a formal complaint lodged with the magistrate by one old market woman against another, for having entered her house unprovoked, beating the plaintiff, and then ascending the stairs to the latter's attic, where she abstracted a sum of money concealed in a chest, and went away with it. Out of all this heterogeneous collection there is gradually coming forth a very complete picture of Roman administration in an Egyptian province, a fact much appreciated by the historian, and something hitherto entirely impossible. It is among these papyri that my friend Dr. Krebs recently found an unpretentious looking piece about three and a-half by eight inches, containing twenty-four lines of Greek text, little thinking that it contained in those twenty-four lines enough to reconstruct one of the most important imperial edicts which the Roman government ever issued.

Before presenting the text a word of introduction will be necessary. The first Roman sovereign to recognize in Christianity peculiar elements entirely at variance and incompatible with the theory of Roman government was the Emperor Decius (249-251 A. D.) What had hitherto been sporadic opposi-

tion, always local and very ineffective, now became the official and recognized policy of the central government. An imperial edict went forth commanding that any person suspected of being a Christian should appear before the local magistrates and prove his fidelity to the government by sacrificing in their presence to the gods. The zeal and faithfulness of the local magistrates were not entirely trusted with the execution of these enactments, and they were therefore reinforced by a board of five prominent citizens. Before this body, then, the luckless brother was brought, and if he refused to sacrifice in their presence, after repeated commands, he was put to death. If, however, he obeyed, and went through the necessary ceremonies, he was freed and given a certificate officially signed, stating that he had done so. If at any future time he were apprehended by the authorities he could show this certificate and obtain immediate release. Such a writing was called a *libellus*, as indeed was any such writing issued by the government, and the holder was called a *libellaticus*. The reader will perceive at once the enviable security enjoyed by the *libellaticus*. To the weaker brethren on the one hand and to the corrupt Roman officials on the other this circumstance offered a great opportunity. For a small bribe the officials would issue the *libellus* to the fearful brother, without requiring his fulfilment of the ceremonies commanded in the edict. Without realizing the wrongfulness of this compromise the *libelli* were bought by some; but also by many who were fully aware of the evil of it, and a regular tariff was soon established. The word *libellus* soon acquired a special and an odious significance among the faithful brethren, who scorned this method of escaping molestation by the authorities, and no more hateful term of reproach could be devised than that of *libellaticus*. The question as to what the proper attitude of the church toward these *libellatici* should be soon became the theme of much discussion among the heads of the church, which continued for a long time, and occasioned a deal of dissension among the reverend bishops. But notwithstanding all this, no copy of a *libellus* has ever been found nor enough of the requirements of the imperial edict of Decius to render its restoration possible, until Dr. Krebs' recent discovery among the above-mentioned papyri of the Fayum.

I translate below, line for line (indicating the *lacunæ* by . . .):

To the supervisors of the sacrifices
 of the village of Alexander's Island,
 by Aurelius Diogenes (the son) of Satabus,
 of the village of Alexander's
 5 Island; about 72 years (old), a scar
 over right eye-brow. And always
 sacrificing to the gods I have
 continued, and now in
 your presence according to
 10 the things commanded (us),
 I have sacrificed and . . .

. . . . of the beasts
 and I call upon you
 to bear witness.
 15 I salute you.
 I, Aurelius Diogenes have given it.
 Aurelius
 sacrificing
 I bear witness.
 20 Year one of Emperor Cæsar
 Gaius Messius Quintus
 Trajan Decius Pius
 Felix Augustus
 Epiphi 2.

¹The document tells its own story. The village of Alexander's Island is known as far back as the third century before Christ, and was located on an island in one of the lakes of the Fayum. That the persecution of Decius should have been carried into so small and insignificant a place is evidence that it was vigorously pushed, and the hopeless task of crushing out the rising faith was begun with the expectation of entire success. Here also were acting the board of five citizens above mentioned, as the first line shows. To these men, or to the Roman official acting with them, the aged Aurelius goes. Whether he was a Christian or not does not appear, but he claims to have always faithfully sacrificed to the state gods, and inference is that he was still a disciple of the state religion who had wrongfully fallen under suspicion of being a Christian; but if the above form was one regularly used by the state, then the same phrase, "I have always continued sacrificing to the gods," would be found also in the *libelli* issued to Christian petitioners. There is, therefore, no ground for asserting that this old man was not one of the weak-kneed brethren who took advantage of the sale of *libelli*.

Unfortunately just those lines (11-13) which describe the ceremonies of sacrifice performed by the holder of the document are badly broken. They of course contain the explanation of "the things commanded us" 1:10. After "I have sacrificed and . . ." in line 11, the restoration to *ἔπιον* made by Harnack is certainly plausible from the contemporaneous literature of the fathers, but on paleographic grounds it is purely a guess. But the restoration of *ἐγευσάμην* after "of the beasts" is without doubt correct, as the end of the word *σαμην* is still very plain at the beginning of line 12. The ceremony therefore consisted in sacrificing, drinking the libation, and tasting the flesh of the sacrifice. This having been performed, either actually or in the convenient imagination of the official, the document already handed in by the petitioner

¹The document has just been published by Dr. Krebs in the *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, Vol. XLVIII, with an excellent photograph of the original, in all respects as good as the document itself. Harnack's review is just appearing in the *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 1894, No. 2.

was ready for the official attest and signature. These are contained in lines 17-19 (in italics). They are written in a coarse, hurried style, entirely different from the beautiful hand in which the document itself is inscribed. The latter is the work of a careful and trained clerk who has written many of the same sort, but the signature, as might be expected, is that of a hurried and careless official. In addition to its being so badly written the texture of the papyrus under the signature is badly broken away and the whole is therefore very difficult to decipher. But the one word still legible at the beginning of line 18 is quite significant, *θύοντα* "sacrificing." Note the accusative case which indicates that the official witnessed "*him* sacrificing."

The same regular hand which wrote the first sixteen lines had already affixed the date below, leaving room for the signature between, as we now see it. This date is the second day of the month Epiphi in the first year of Decius, or June 26, 250 A.D.

By this discovery the long controversy as to exactly what a *libellus* was, is settled beyond all argument. It is evident that the document was not offered by the Roman official but was made out by some scribe at the request of the petitioner himself; but it had no value whatever until he had handed it in to the local magistrate who would sign it whether the petitioner had sacrificed or not, provided the necessary bribe was forthcoming. Further than this, the imperial edict of Rome which occasioned the first systematic persecution of the Christian church can now be reconstructed in all its essentials. They were: (1) the appointment of the board of five above-mentioned to assist the local authorities, (2) the systematic persecution of men, women and children who would not sacrifice, drink the libation and taste the sacrifice, (3) the severest punishment for those officials who failed to carry out the edict to its fullest.

Out of the dread years which so sorely tried the rising church, out of the vast whirlpool which marked Rome's final efforts to annihilate a faith which, less than three-quarters of a century later, was to become the state religion of Rome herself—out of those far centuries which seem so unreal to us of today, has come this little fragment, like a voice from the dead, to tell us more vividly what that period of storm and stress brought to the individual believer in the early church. To every student of church history it is a message which will be as welcome as it was unexpected, for the completion of a picture which has always lacked just this last vivid touch.